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HENRY ARTHUR JONES AND THE DRAMATIC RENASCENCE

BY THOMAS H. DICKINSON

THE dramatic renaissance is a fact. One can be assured of this without being certain of the final form it may take. A few years ago it seemed probable that naturalism would bring out a great play. The hope is now less confident. Great as have been the achievements of dramatic art during the last few years, we have no play as a result to which we can ascribe an abiding place, unless it be one of the satiric comedies of the most whimsical of Britain's playwrights. Serious photographic-naturalism and social-purpose art have brought forth nothing that we can promise immortality, and those plays which carry the traits of these forms to the highest perfection, such as Galsworthy's *Justice*, are the best illustrations of the vital shortcomings of the schools. On the side of reaction from naturalism something has been done. How far Barrie's plays represent absolute achievement critics will be unable to say until they have supplemented the quick judgment of the production by the calmer criticism of the study. In denying his plays to contemporary readers, Barrie is probably protecting them against the superficial judgments of his own day in favor of the more stable valuation of later time. He is also removing from our time instruments of undoubted value for the creating of standards. On the works of one man, Synge, criticism unites in bestowing the expectation of long life. The only disquieting reflection, to the lover of Synge's work, is that the unanimity of its praise may portend a near reaction. It will not be our own time that will bestow immortality on Synge, or the succeeding age that will demolish him. His proper position will hardly be known until the second turn of the tide.

But while the age has brought forth little in fruits no one will question that there has been a substantial renaissance.

If we compare the situation of drama to-day with its situation a generation ago, we find many striking features of its better health. Strange to say, these are more to be seen in the attitude of thinking people toward the stage than in any intrinsic merits of the drama as an art, or the stage as an institution. The changes that have taken place are changes of thinking and social preparation. During the last generation drama has become established as a social institution of great potency and flexibility. Dramatic art has taken its place as an art that needs not to be apologized for; an art that is, indeed, somewhat feared on account of its ready instrumentality in serving a social purpose and expressing a distributed attitude. There have also been some interesting steps in advance for the art of drama. A generation ago literary drama meant poetic drama, and, by this token, unproduced drama. To-day the art of the produced prose play of contemporary life has been accepted without too many reservations in excellent company. Beginning with Matthew Arnold's respectful words, written in *The Nineteenth Century* for 1879—the first respectful words spoken for the modern English drama by an acknowledged critic of our day—the consideration of drama has grown more and more familiar under the pens of the learned. Augustine Birrell, H. D. Traill, W. L. Courtney, Edmund Gosse, Professor Gilbert Murray are but a few of those who have turned from the concerns of the scholar to the consideration of modern drama. Drama has entered the universities of England and America, no longer as a species of elocution, or a debased form of literary teaching, but as an art that is connected structurally and by content with the interests of our day. Moreover, drama is winning acceptance in the sisterhood of the arts. Arthur Symonds applies to the play the same delicate criticism that he applies to music and painting. Barrie gives up the novel for the play. Even Meredith and Hardy and James, to mention those of an older generation, tried their hands at dramatic composition, and Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy of the newer generation, are almost as well known for their plays as for their novels. The fact that the kindly recognition that is coming to drama is based no less on what drama is expected to do than on what has already been performed, quite as much on potential as actual achievements, does not diminish the significance of the standards of respect that have been enforced for an hitherto despised art.

Results of this kind do not occur accidentally or blindly. For every broad advance that is made individual men may be found who have been heart and soul the prime movers in the advance. The wonder is that for a movement so broad and far reaching the number of men who served as engineers and prophets should have been so small. For England and America one can count on the fingers of one hand the number of men who during the last generation have given their lives to the rehabilitation of an English drama. Many have given as they were able under the press of competing interests, but William Archer and Brander Matthews have always been on the firing line and have slept on their arms. These were the men who saw long ago the certain growth of the functions of the drama in popular government and as an outlet of social dynamics, and, in season and out, stood for uncompromising art values as well as for social health in the theatre. Recognizing the close relationship between the state of society and the state of the art these two men have devoted their lives to educating public taste and to formulating rational opinions. Both have written plays, but it has been as expositors, as school-masters, as guides that they will be remembered. To these, who were active when many who are now reaching for laurels were in their cradles, there must be added as the subject of this study another whose influence and personal contribution have been even more significant. One is reminded of the debt that is owed to Henry Arthur Jones by the recent performance in London of the play that first brought him success and fortune. *The Silver King*, first performed twenty-three years ago, displays in many respects the characteristics of the author as a man and as an artist. In the years which have passed since the first production of this play tremendous strides have been taken in the state of English drama, and many of these are directly or indirectly to be credited to the influence of the author.

Twenty-three years ago the situation of Henry Arthur Jones was not precisely similar to that of either Archer or Matthews. A playwright of abundant popular success in his earliest efforts, he had apparently but to follow the path laid out before him to an assured position. At an early period we find him turning aside from the pleasant task of purveying to an amusement seeking crowd to follow the less thankful pursuit of appealing to an ever narrowing circle of the

judicious. Not only so. Jones might well have continued to the day of his death to be the artist who permitted his work to "speak for itself." There is for the artist every incentive to do this. It is well known that every line the artist draws outside the frame of the picture, every word he speaks outside the structure of his novel or play is a tempting of fate. But Jones was the first dramatist in England to see the logic of the situation, and to see that in his day the task of the advanced artist of the stage is even more in the direction of the reconstitution of the standards of taste, in a leavening of the general mind to an apprehension of dramatic art values, than in the composition of excellent plays. Indeed, someone had to do the outside work if the inside work was ever to secure proper understanding. No one could do that work as effectively, though, at the same time, it must be said, with as great a personal expense, as the man who practised the art in his own right. In spite of expense to private credit, in spite of misunderstanding, Jones chose the hard and sincere task, and for every step he took on the road of advance he delivered two blows to make that road firmer for his fellows. For such work as Jones has done there is too little reward. The play is the thing, and the man who, instead of limiting himself to composition, devotes his energies to the preparation of an audience for the artist who may follow is likely to find his work neglected in favor of that of the man whose success he made possible. Jones has enough plays to his credit, but it is a question whether his fame as a playwright, by one of the popular ironies which we need not try to justify, has not suffered on account of his activities as a dramatic bush-ranger and path-breaker.

It is no accident that Jones's first, and perhaps greatest, play is a melodrama. *The Silver King* is marked by precisely those qualities that have characterized his career, and the following plays, *The Middleman*, *Saints and Sinners*, and *The Crusaders*, are as simply conceived and as energetically governed as have been his own campaigns. These plays display both the weakness and the strength of his art, a weakness which has always just kept him from absolute achievement as a playwright, a strength that has made him a most courageous fighter for better standards. As a writer of melodrama Jones saw things substantially, in large chunks, so to speak; he saw things moralistically, and he saw things emotionally. Never subtle, nor, it must be confessed, ever

particularly acute, he depended upon force rather than finesse, on impression in the mass rather than on intuition or complex analysis. His early absorption in moral and religious questions was characteristic. To him life presented itself as a field of armed camps of good and evil, and the soldiers from the one camp seldom strayed over into the confines of the other. In many respects this is the easiest way by which one can look upon life; it is the only way that leads to fixed judgments; it is the only way that makes one dog-sure of his methods. And Jones was always dog-sure of his methods, and his methods were predicated on morals. Jones's early plays were evangels; and he was an evangelist. And so he has continued to this day, less sure to-day, perhaps, that the world can be saved, but not a whit less sure of the adequacy of his moral standards to cope with all problems, even the problems of art in a democracy.

Such a man could not satisfy himself long with mere playwriting. Even as an artist he always answered to what may be called the *moral* imperative; against his own interest pushing out into new lines of effort, stubbornly seeking out new methods and social and technical fields to conquer, perfecting himself by an insistent determination of taking thought, and applying to each new stage the dynamic courage and heavy determination that are the driving forces of his career. It is this very moral determination for the advance that lays the heavy hand on Jones's art and draws it back at the threshold of absolute excellence. For art plays some cruel and ironic tricks, sometimes alighting joyfully on the work thrown off by an unconscious hand, and eluding the self-perfecting industry of "taking pains."

It is with some sense of irony that we notice that Jones was practically the first to introduce the work of Ibsen to an English audience. He tells us that in 1881 there came to his attention a German form of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Recognizing the dramatic effectiveness of the play, Jones adapted it to an English form, giving it the title, after the Scribe formula, *Breaking a Butterfly*. That thirty years ago a young playwright should not have apprehended the real significance of the work of Ibsen is not surprising. Certainly we should not hold it against Jones, for in selecting the play he showed his immediate recognition of the remarkable skill and technique of the unknown Norwegian. But this experience was of a piece with Jones's whole career.

He has usually been first in the field in the discernment of the new thing, and has paid the price of courageous struggle for its adoption. And then when it has come to pass it has come transmuted to new values, in a form that he does not altogether understand and does not approve. The light of the comic spirit usually plays around the heads of those of serious purpose. There is something of irony, too, in the fact that Jones, who, above all others, has created for us a middle-class English drama, for he is as clearly the creator of the middle-class in English drama as Dumas was the discoverer of the *demi-monde* for French drama, should have devoted his life to attacking that middle-class that he represents in all of his plays. His plays are hewed out of the substance of middle-class England. One might call the roll of Jones's *dramatis personae* without finding a character that displays a distinction differentiating him from this class. This is precisely the reason why Jones's plays have been subject to the immediate and instinctive distrust of the English play-going public. They too effectively hold the mirror up to nature. They foster no illusion whatever. They show British middle-class life to be drab, dull, full of forbidden pockets, pugnacious, and frustrate. The quarrels between Jones and his audiences are like the quarrels in English middle-class homes, explosions of irritability at too much intimacy. Even Jones's daring and pugnacity are absolutely of the British middle-class type. His forceful, religious, dogged moral force has carried him forward in his art and in his propaganda in a lockstep with John Bull's forceful and unimaginative progress in commerce and empire. Jones made the mistake of applying the same principles to his plays that he applied to his public work. Both are forthright, moralistic, undistinguished. And the British public, asking this of the party worker, condemns it in the artist. Jones quotes from Fielding's *Tom Jones*, and applies to himself, the remark that "whenever his readers found him dull they might rest assured it was with some profound purpose." And the British public, which despises to be shown as it is in its plays, answers readily to the profound purpose of the propagandist. And so Jones has never been quite a success in his plays, but he has been altogether a success in his public work. For in its art the British public demands illusion and brilliancy, but in its public work it is more willing to listen to the sermons of a Jones than to the brilliant epigrams of

a Chesterton, or a Belloc. As Oscar Wilde was a witty and caustic critic of English society they slew him, but as he was in his plays the depicter of an artificial illusion of life they crowned him. As Bernard Shaw tickles their risibilities with his antics they applaud him, but as he lashes them with pungent censure they do not listen or they misunderstand. The grudge that Jones holds against British Puritanism in behalf of his plays should be forgotten in gratitude for the complaisant hearing it has given to his lectures.

Perhaps because he was something of an evangelist Jones refused from the start to see the stage through the eyes of an H. J. Byron or a Sidney Grundy. To him the theatre appeared in another light, as the instrument for a popular campaign. In this view he was but following for the theatre the principles that Ruskin and Morris had held for art. Morris had made the cause of beauty a cause for an appeal to the people, and even Arnold had been touched not a little with the warmth of social issues. Certainly there was some valid reason for treating the theatre in this way, for after all it is a social institution, depending upon the people for its life from day to day, and ministering to the people on their homely spiritual sides. And so the first fruits of Jones's referendum to the people of the problems of the theatre was the establishment of the Playgoers' Club in 1884, an organization for the study and support of good plays, before which Jones delivered the inaugural. The establishment of the Playgoers' Club was not without importance both to Jones and to British drama, for with it there was started that rage of speculation and comment which has made of Jones a crusader and the drama itself a social program. All this depends upon a new theory, a theory much held in our day, that art is dependent upon social support, and that its issues may be served by organization. Art has been taken to the people in the same sense that the infirm and dependent have been laid upon the consciences of the people; the reform of art is asked for in the same way that the reform of judicial procedure is demanded, as things that can be reached by a referendum. For this theory Jones had prepared the way three years before the organization of the Playgoers' Club in a paper on "The Theatre and the Mob." His statement of the obligations of membership in the Playgoers' Club has something of the force of a social creed. "To be a member of this Club implies a devotion to the interests of the Drama

for its own sake, not as an idle amusement for a vacant hour, but as a serious and fine art, which has for its end the portrayal of all the varying passions of the human heart, and all the chances and changes of our mortal life."

Having put his hand to the plow Jones did not turn back. Since then his life has been devoted to the evangelization of dramatic art. To his thorough belief in the reasonableness of the social propaganda that he has raised, and to his reactions from the manner in which his apostleship has been received, are to be ascribed all the steps in his career. His plays have been, almost without exception, attacks on social abuses, hypocrisy, or Pharisaism. It almost seems as if playwriting had become with him a side issue as compared with the spreading of the gospel of social service through dramatic art. He was one of the first English playwrights to insist that his works should have the advantage of book publication. Publication was common in France and to a lesser degree in Germany. In England it had been limited to belated publication in acting editions, whose only value was for the amateur and professional actor. Jones made appeal to the discriminating judgment of the larger reading public not alone for his own plays but for all plays. The arguments for the publication of plays are well known and need not be rehearsed. Jones stated them in his preface to his publication of *Saints and Sinners* in 1891, and George Bernard Shaw stated them in his preface to the first volume of *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant*. Whatever may have been the importance of publication to particular plays, there can be no doubt that the growth of the custom of publishing plays has vastly conduced to the respect under which drama is held and to the upbuilding of dramatic taste. The need was not to turn the play-loving public from the theatre to the study, for this would defeat the ends of publication, but to draw a larger share of the reading public into an understanding support of the best things of the theatre. That this has been done, and that thereby there has come to pass something of a reconciliation between English literature and drama no one who knows the conditions can doubt. When plays were found to be worthy of book publication they were found to be worthy also of the consideration of cultivated minds, and of a place in the culture of the nation. To accomplish these ends Jones was willing to sacrifice some of the theatrical attributes of a play in favor of

its literary attributes. He said: "There is but one way of advancing, or even of holding our own, and that is by making the theatre a national art with a definite literary and intellectual basis, disdainful of all theatrical effect that will not submit to take an auxiliary place."

In addition to inaugurating the custom of publication of plays, Jones learned from his master, Dumas, not to compel a work of art to speak for itself. In the old days it may have been well enough to send a book forth heralded only with an ingratiating letter to a patron. But to-day the work of art that breaks new ground demands the double display boards of the sandwich man or the cap and jingling bells of the jester. Here again the daring of Jones serves a good purpose. Venturing boldly in where others would have been reticent and silent, he defends his own plays in prefaces and broadsides in the magazines. He defends the use of the Bible and religious topics in drama; he defends the play with a moral, and the dramatist who would be forever educating the people. Sometimes he discusses the cost of producing a play, and shows the nightly receipts, convincing the reader by argument and figures that it is not always lack of merit that damns a play: it may be the difference between two hundred and three hundred pounds nightly receipts. He does not scruple at rising to strong and vigorous speech in attack upon that hypocrisy that he holds to be the cardinal sin of English society and the cause of low standards of dramatic art. Once in church he had listened to the rolling aloft of the Psalms of David. He comes away trembling with wrath:

For those murderers who are chanting the songs of a treacherous murderer, a liar, and an adulterer—a man after God's own heart, as the Scriptures say—a treacherous murderer, a liar, and an adulterer—a royal man for all that,—I say these good worshipers who are so naïvely employed are the same average English playgoers who in the autumn of 1894 arose in a panic of wrathful zeal for the morality of our stage, and in a series of letters to *The Times* overwhelmed for a year or two the rising school of the English drama.

In this passage we have revealed Jones the propagandist, trembling with zeal for a cause, tingling with righteous wrath, with which there is mingled not a little of personal bitterness. He has been so near the seat of war that he has smelled the powder of combat; and his attitude is one of personal repulsion. His essays in *The Nineteenth Century*

and *The New Review*, and his public addresses, later gathered into two volumes, *The Renascence of the English Drama* and *The Foundations of a National Drama*, are records, not only of the state of English drama during two decades, but also of the temper of an unhappy warrior.

But Jones compels admiration by his indomitable pluck and persistence. Aside from writing for the Reviews Jones has carried his campaign to the public platform, making his plea to two kinds of audiences, the one the audience of workingmen, the Sunday afternoon, or "University Extension" audience of London and the provincial cities; the other the University audience of London and America. His first plea to educated men in behalf of the theatre was made before the students of the City of London College in 1893. Since then he has brought his message to the students of Harvard, and Yale, and Columbia, in America, dwelling always on the implications of drama and education, religion, and social service. Nor has he shrunk from an argumentative skirmish with such men as H. D. Traill, Dr. Pearson, and Gilbert Murray. A catalogue of his topics covers practically all the social aspects of drama. Drama as distinguished from amusement, drama and the mob, drama and education, religion and the theatre, first-night judgments of plays, the national theatre, drama in the provinces, the dangers of the censorship, are treated vigorously if with much repetition. With the intensive study of dramatic art he has no concern. Speculations in technique, the patter of the studio, the concerns of the artist workman, have little interest for him. He remains always the social reformer wielding before him the sword of a militant art. In the preface to *The Renascence of the English Drama* he sums up the things he has been fighting for in the following words:

1. I have fought for a recognition of the distinction between the art of the drama on the one hand and popular amusement on the other, and of the greater pleasure to be derived from the art of the drama.

2. I have fought for the entire freedom of the modern dramatist, for his right to portray all aspects of human life, all passions, all opinions; for freedom of search, freedom of phrase, freedom of treatment.

3. I have fought for sanity and wholesomeness, for largeness and breadth of view.

Of Jones, the hater of shams, the attacker of hypocrisy and of Mrs. Grundy, enough has been said. He continues throughout his life to berate the "smug and banal ideals, the ways of living, the forms of religion, the terror and ignorance of art of the English middle-classes." In his art and in his program he is all of a piece. He has the same club for that Mrs. Grundy who drives a truthful dramatist from the theatres that he has for the respectable people who drive a faithful minister from his charge because he lives up to the teaching of his religion. This is the stamp of the man who has by sheer moral force had a tremendous effect upon English dramatic conditions. If we were asked what is the mass effect of Jones's career, we should answer that as exhorter and revivalist he had awakened people of all classes to a new conception of their duties toward the theatre. It is no accident that everything Jones has accomplished has been accomplished through the people; that he has hardly spoken an illuminating word that would be of service to the young artist searching for a mastery of his materials. Musset has written:

Trying to make things perfect is not new; on the contrary, nothing is older, but nothing is more allowable, lawful, fitting, and beneficial; if we are only able to make perfect matches, that means a service rendered to the whole world, for it is difficult to get a spark from steel and flint. But when it comes to attacking people themselves and trying to make them perfect, oh! oh! it becomes serious.

It is because even in his plays Jones's eye has been upon the man whom he would reform rather than upon the perfectible formulas of the art itself, that at the end one gains from the mass of his work an unfair impression of futility. It is not that he has accomplished little, but that he started out to accomplish tasks beyond the measure of man's mind. Matthew Arnold, in the essay to which we have already referred, had stated the problem of dramatic art in social terms: "We in England have no modern drama at all. . . . Our vast society is not homogeneous enough, not sufficiently united, even any large portion of it, in a common view of life, a common ideal, capable of serving as basis for a modern English drama." This dictum is either true, in which case the task of creating a drama is staggering in its immensity, or it is false. Jones accepts the dictum as true and starts out to correct the social condition. No wonder he has grown weary and dispirited in the fight. Yet he continues

to this day the large popular appeal for the building of a drama by the correcting of people's hearts. He continues to throw the problem of the artist into the hands of the crowd.

Meanwhile there has grown up, energized largely by Jones's militant idealism, a group of those who believe that Matthew Arnold was wrong, that it is not going to be necessary to remake society in order to create a drama. These men believe that society is not and never was coherent to the extent that it united in one harmonious chorus of approval of high and definite artistic ideals. These believe that what the best requires is only permission to grow in its nook. In the minds of these the evangel should be preached not to the crowd, but to the dramatist; the sanction should be sought, not from society, but from the artist's own imperative standards. For such a view as this Jones has no concern as a preacher, though he has upheld it in his own practise. Courageous himself to his own loss, often standing alone when with his technical gifts it would have been easy to stand with the multitude, he still looks for the hope of drama in a change of attitude by the people. One wonders whether the man himself has not been greater than his program. "It is impossible," he writes in his last book, "to have two opposing national standards of taste in drama." Nay, it is impossible to conceive of there being so few. Who imagines that the work of any great age depended upon a uniformity of taste? Would it not be a craven art that would demand such support? Here again appears the ironic discrepancy between Jones the artist and Jones the social thinker. Meanwhile under his strong arm there have arisen others whom Jones does not know. For the Irish Players, for the repertory movements, for the provincial municipal theatres, for the free stage societies, for the undoubted contributions of some younger writers and producers, he has but few and grudging words, though they are doing much to bring to pass his dreams in concrete form. And in a very real sense they are the first fruits of a harvest of his resolute sowing. To history, Jones will appear as the evangelist of dramatic art who came before the law-givers and builders of roads.

THOMAS H. DICKINSON.